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SUBJECT: The Politics of History: "Freezing Point" Author
Uses the Past as Comment on the Present

REF: A) Guangzhou 20890; B) Beijing 08115; C) Beijing 01994

11. (U) Classified by Consul General Robert X Goldberg.
Reason 1.4 (d).

12. (C) Summary and comment: Guangzhou history Professor
Yuan Weishi, who is best known for his January "Freezing
Point" article, is following in the footsteps of Chinese
intellectuals whose views are out-of-sync with those of the
ruling elite - whether pre-1949 or post 1989. He has been
using historical analogies to criticize CCP interpretations
of history; his latest project, examining early KMT history,
will likely be met with criticism because of the CCP's
sensitive, albeit slightly thawing, relationship with the
KMT. Comment: At age 74, Professor Yuan, unlike his
acquaintances in the "Rights Protection Movement," is not
prepared to engage or defend rural and urban protestors.
Instead, Yuan's activities remain focused directly on
attacking the "historical" foundations of China's national
mythology. End summary and comment.

Background on Yuan

13. (C) Professor Yuan Weishi, 74, rose to prominence on
January 11 when his essay, "Modernization and History
Textbooks," was published in the "Freezing Point" (Bingdian)
supplement of the China Youth Daily (ref B, C). The
article, which sparked a controversy that eventually led to
the supplement's temporary ban, criticized the history
textbooks frequently used in China's junior middle schools
regarding the orthodox Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
interpretation of the late Qing Dynasty's Boxer Rebellion.
Yuan described the rebellion as "inhumane" and he did not
shy away from western accounts that the rebels killed more
than 200 foreigners. Yuan is best known for two books:
"Twilight of an Empire", Diguo luori, which deals with
changes in the late Qing Dynasty and "Farewell to the
Medieval Ages," Gaobie zhongshiji, which focuses on
historical documents from the May 4th Movement. The New
York Times and South China Post have highlighted Yuan's
work as a symbol of China's dynamic struggle to deal with
its past. Yuan is active in many different reform-minded
groups in Guangzhou. He was a founding member of the
Guangdong Humanistic Association (Guangdong xueren shehui,
ref A) and has given lectures for the group on historical
and contemporary political issues.

Methods of Criticism

14. (C) Yuan's method, investigating the past and exposing problems and choices that are analogies for the present, is known in Chinese as "jiegou fengjin" and has been an oft used strategy among scholars and protestors. Yuan's fundamental question is "how to save China."

15. (C) Yuan researches the cornerstone events of Chinese history, upon which rests the CCP's interpretation of history and the idea of "Peaceful Development." One example of this was the "Freezing Point" article, which dealt with Chinese aggression against foreign powers during the Second Opium War and the Boxer Rebellion. Another example was a 2004 article on the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1865) in which, contrary to viewing rebellion as an exemplar of class revolt, Yuan argues that the rebel leaders were ignorant and inhumane. Rebels not only killed people in combat, but also condemned many to starvation, reducing China's population by one-fourth. Yuan noted that Karl Marx himself, who at first was sympathetic to the actions of the Taiping Rebellion, later denounced the dictatorial system of the Taiping Rebellion as an example of "Oriental Chinese Evil."

16. (C) Yuan's articles also have been timed to coincide with certain controversial events. For example, he published an article on the history of the Chinese railroad and delayed it to correspond with the announcement of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad, which has been criticized for its potential environmental damage. Yuan has even found ways to criticize Mao Zedong (referring to Mao's pen name, "Zhi Ren") for his conservative views on early Communist Party democracy.

Future Research: KMT History

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17. (C) For his next book project, Yuan plans to "systematically elaborate the opinions" of the Kuomintang (KMT) period of Chinese history. Yuan wants to revise the standard interpretation of Sun Yat-sen's thought. In his 2004 book, "Farewell to the Medieval Ages," Yuan described how the teachings of the Huangpu military academy (which established the foundation of the new Kuomintang army) were the beginning of Sun's turn toward undemocratic and inhumane principles. The students at Huangpu (including a young Zhou Enlai) were taught to oppose individualism and to follow the will of the party unquestionably. He also plans to argue that the later ideology of Chiang Kai-shek and CCP leaders was born of this view. Yuan did hint at some slightly more positive elements of the KMT, notably a limited amount of freedom of association, which even the CCP does not allow today.

18. (SBU) Any sort of historical analysis of the KMT is sensitive. For example, films on the KMT's role in the "Anti-Japanese War" are very rare. This September, a mainland-produced movie on the KMT's efforts during the war, "Iron Blood of Kunlun" (tiexue kunlun), was finally released on a limited basis in Shanghai theatres. The movie, which depicts the pivotal battle fought between the KMT's 5th Army and key Japanese troops of the Fifth Division, was filmed in 1996 around the time of the 50th anniversary of the Japanese War. The movie was deemed sensitive because it showed the heroism of KMT soldiers and was not to be shown till this year. With the Party's recent efforts to woo the current generation of KMT leaders, it is now acceptable to show a film that casts a more favorable light on the KMT's fight against the Japanese invaders.

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